

Red Wolf Recovery Program - Field Notes and Observations

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The morning started with bad news - our aerial telemetry vendor was closing his airplane operation at the Manteo airport. The news was very disturbing because the Red Wolf Recovery Program uses aerial telemetry as the primary means of monitoring the growing wolf population here in northeastern NC. From the air, I can census the entire 1.7 million acres of the recovery area and typically hear all 70 radio collars in about two hours. Covering such a vast area from the ground would be impractical due to the nature of the habitat and the staff time that would be necessary for such an undertaking.

Because today's flight might be the last for a while, I decided to make it a high altitude, long range flight. I'll do these flights 2-3 times a year to be able to look "outside" of the five county recovery area in an effort to find animals that may have wandered away from the core area. By flying at an altitude of 7000' and using antennas located on both sides of the plane (each one covering a distance of 20 miles), I'll be able to encompass a flight path 40 miles wide!

Usually aerial telemetry flights are conducted from an altitude of around 500' - 1000'. From that height I'm able to record locations on individual wolves. I'm also looking to be sure pack members are within their own territory boundaries or whether or not some of the yearlings have decided to "disperse" and try and form their own packs.

On this day, I unfortunately, heard a "mortality signal" from a male breeder that had been moving around after displacement from its territory. We had recently noticed from the air that this wolf did not look healthy and therefore, we had been attempting to capture it. When the animal was retrieved from the field later that day, it had apparently died from complications associated with sarcoptic mange (a very debilitating disease). This could help explain how an adult breeder had been displaced from his territory.

The rest of the flight was uneventful. On this day I didn't locate any missing animals outside of the recovery area. Fortunately, I found out later that we would still be able to use our vendor to conduct aerial telemetry activities until we could acquire a different vendor later on in the year.